Ending child poverty

Promoting social protection to tackle child poverty

Across the Europe and Central Asia Region, regardless of national wealth, too many children are living in monetary poverty and many are growing up without the basic means they need to grow, learn and stay safe.

The evidence is clear. Monetary poverty is closely linked to a range of serious risks for individuals and societies. Above all, poverty is a violation of children’s rights, stifling their potential. Poverty hurts children’s cognitive development and, in turn, leads to lower income and health in adulthood. Young children are slower to develop reading skills when households cannot afford books, toys and learning materials. And the chronic stress of growing up poor appears to have a direct impact on the brain: the longer children live in poverty, the greater their levels of stress and the greater the impact.

It is difficult to put a precise figure on the numbers of children living in poverty across the Region, given differences in how countries calculate poverty. Taken together, however, the available data suggest that more than 22 million children are living in poverty in the Region. Their age and their dependence on adults leave them far more vulnerable to the impact of poverty, with potentially lifelong consequences. At the same time, national social protection programmes – such as child benefits – are not adequately addressing child poverty because of limited coverage and the limited amount provided per family.

Natia, a mother in Tbilisi, Georgia, was once the breadwinner for herself and her husband, offering private classes in English and German. Then in 2011, when their son Tsotne was born with a severe disability, everything changed. “Tsotne’s father didn’t want a child with a disability” she says. “One day, he simply disappeared.” Natia’s new husband was displaced from his village in South Ossetia and does not live with the family full-time. With two more children, and often alone, Natia’s worries about money have often kept the 38-year-old mother awake at night.

Natia’s family now receives much-needed help through Targeted Social Assistance (TSA), the Government of Georgia’s flagship programme to address extreme poverty. The scheme also includes the country’s first ever monthly benefit for each child – 10 Georgian Lari ($4) – as a result of UNICEF advocacy, backed by hard evidence on the potential impact for children.

Toward 2030

1 NO POVERTY

Target 1.2: By 2030, reduce by at least half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty.
Because children comprise a third of the population and experience poverty in unique ways from adults, national poverty cannot be eliminated or decreased significantly without tackling child poverty. This means that addressing the poverty faced by families with children is essential if the first of the Sustainable Development Goals is to be attained: Halving the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty by 2030.

UNICEF and its partners (including the World Bank and European Union) are contributing to the Region’s poverty reduction efforts by supporting reinforced policies to tackle child poverty. These efforts include providing quality and accessible services for the most deprived children, providing a minimum income for families with children, and ensuring that financial barriers do not stop children from reaching their full potential.

**How poverty is measured in the Europe and Central Asia Region**

Policies and programmes to address child poverty must be informed by an understanding of which children are poor and the nature of the poverty they face. There are two main ways to assess poverty: by measuring monetary child poverty or multidimensional child poverty.

**The measurement of absolute monetary child poverty** assesses whether a family has enough money to provide every member with nutritious food, clean water, adequate clothing, adequate housing and other basic needs. It is important to measure the proportion of children living in monetary poor households. In many countries in the Region, including those in the EU, relative poverty – whether a child lives in a family that is significantly worse off than other households independently of the cost of a minimum basket of goods and services - is used to measure the number of children living in monetary poverty.

**The measurement of multidimensional child poverty** recognizes that child poverty is about more than just money. It measures whether a child’s rights to, for example, education, health, housing, or play are being upheld. A small number of countries in the Region have measured multidimensional child poverty.

**Fast facts**

- Available data suggest that more than 22 million children are living below national poverty lines in the Europe and Central Asia Region.
- Children are far more likely to be living in monetary poverty than adults: Children in both Turkey and Romania are more than 1.5 times more likely to be poor than adults.
- In Armenia, almost one in every three children are not only poor in monetary terms: they are also deprived of rights that constitute poverty such as nutrition, housing and leisure opportunities.
- In Serbia, the poorest three to five year olds are three times less likely to have children's books at home than other children, and are also three times less likely to be on track in literacy and numeracy.
Six year old Gulzan (on the right) plays with her sister outside of their family home in Kyzylorda city, Kazakhstan. The family of four lives in a one-room house in a poor suburb.

Percentage of children and adults living in poverty

Source: Eurostat accessed 2/8/2018  Notes: Data for Turkey are from 2015.
Child-sensitive social protection

It is in every government’s long-term interest to invest in children and in child-sensitive social protection to prevent, manage and overcome the poverty that threatens their well-being. Social protection includes regular and predictable cash transfers, such as child benefits, to shield children from the worst impacts of poverty, and to help the most vulnerable children – such as children living with disabilities, those from minority communities and refugee and migrant children - access essential services. It also includes health insurance schemes that cover children, and support for poor children to access education, through subsidised school meals and transportation. Special services are also needed to provide the most vulnerable children and families with the extra support and care they need. This includes day care and respite care for the families of children with disabilities, family support and counselling, and support to help children leaving care to make the transition to an independent life. An effective social protection system integrates such services with cash benefits and tailored case management to provide a strong support system for vulnerable families and children.

Challenges

Over the past 20 years, countries in Europe and Central Asia have seen impressive economic growth, improved standards of living and a halving of the number of people living in monetary poverty. But the benefits of economic advances have been shared unevenly. Some groups of people, and their children, have been left behind, locked into persistent poverty as a result of economic and social exclusion. One key challenge is that governments do not always monitor child poverty, and poor children are not given the attention they deserve. As a result, there are few policies or programmes to address this crucial issue.

Challenges related to policies on child poverty

- The social protection programmes that have the greatest benefits for children such as child and family benefits have not been prioritized in many countries in the Region.
- Some governments in the Region do not provide social protection to adolescents over the age of 14, leaving them more vulnerable to dropping out of school.
- Government budgets for social protection are limited, and there is a lack of human resources needed to run effective social protection programmes.
- Social services are limited or unavailable, especially in rural areas. Families who do not receive enough support to keep children with disabilities at home are more likely to place them in institutions. Those who should benefit from social protection face barriers such as bureaucratic processes and lack of information about entitlements and programmes.
- Social protection benefits and services remain fragmented and siloed meaning that children and families do not receive the integrated support they need to overcome the many challenges they face. For example, a child living with a disability whose family is poor needs to be supported with both cash assistance and additional services such as day care and respite care to ensure the child and the family are able to overcome these challenges.

With the poorest children less likely to access health care, complete their education or contribute fully to social, political and economic development, they are also more likely to suffer from poor nutrition and grow up in poverty, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disadvantage.

While countries in the Region have social protection schemes to meet the needs of children, Governments are cutting their spending on social protection, with benefits for children and families being eroded by austerity measures. On average, approximately 10 percent of social protection expenditure goes to supporting children and families in the Region. Those benefits are usually too small to make any meaningful difference to families, and many people in need are still excluded from them entirely. Social protection benefits and services remain fragmented, which means that children and families do not receive the integrated support they need to overcome the many challenges they face. For example, a child living with a disability whose family is poor needs to be supported with both cash assistance and additional services such as day care and respite care to ensure the child and the family are able to overcome these challenges.

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Roma Health Mediator Vesna Jovanic (on the left, black jacket) speaks with a family in a Roma community in Belgrade, Serbia. The UNICEF supported Roma Health Mediator programme aims to address disparities between the Roma community and the wider population in Serbia by assigning people from the community to act as intermediaries between families and the government. The Roma Health Mediators program, designed by the Ministry of Health and supported by UNICEF, provides advocacy and care for approximately 500,000 vulnerable people, with a focus on women and children.
Ending child poverty

Our aim

UNICEF works with partners, particularly governments, to build robust national systems to reach every deprived family and every deprived child to protect them from the long-term consequences of poverty. We provide vital monitoring of child poverty, and aim to reinforce the Region’s ability to collect and analyse data to develop effective policies and track their impact.

“The pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 1 – ending poverty in all its forms everywhere – must put children first as the group most severely affected by poverty. It is only by tackling child poverty that we can achieve the world’s poverty goal and safeguard children’s rights.”
Afshan Khan, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia

Our actions

All children have the right to a standard of living that enables their full development. That is why UNICEF supports governments across the Region as they try to shield children from the impact of poverty and deprivation. We aim to prevent families from falling into poverty as a result of unemployment, ill health or other shocks, help families lift themselves out of poverty and end intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Aiming for an end to poverty – in line with Sustainable Development Goal 1 – we are working with governments and other partners across the Region to halve child poverty by 2030 and strengthen universal social protection systems to diminish the impact of poverty on children. This includes advocating for Governments to adequately budget and prioritize addressing child poverty. We work to expand the coverage and flexibility of such systems, including in emergencies. We also support governments to link social protection for children and families with other services, such as health care, education and job training. And we support the monitoring of child poverty and the impact of social protection.

Promoting greater social protection coverage

In Georgia, our work with the Government and the World Bank has supported a major increase in social benefits for children. Georgia introduced a child benefit scheme in 2015 that reached more than 153,000 children under the age of 16 in its first year. A UNICEF-developed methodology helped to identify beneficiaries. UNICEF Georgia also supports the bi-annual Welfare Monitoring Study, which tracks poverty and inequality trends and is a key tool for policy decisions on social protection.

Promoting integrated social protection

In Armenia, UNICEF has been supporting the Government’s reform of its social protection system to move away from focusing mainly on providing and managing cash-assistance to a more proactive and holistic system to provide support to families and children based on their specific needs. With UNICEF’s support the Government has introduced the Integrated Social Services approach which brings together several benefits and services such as social assistance, pensions, employment support, and services for people with disabilities. This provides tailor-made support to families through Integrated Services Centres. In 2017, more than 338,000 beneficiaries received services through 18 of these centres.

Monitoring child poverty

We support national efforts to monitor child poverty, making it possible to track progress across the Region and develop effective policies and programmes based on hard evidence. This includes evaluations of the impact of enhanced social protection on children’s lives. UNICEF is a partner agency...
for the SDG indicator on multidimensional poverty, acting at global, regional and country level to support national governments collecting and monitoring data on all dimensions of poverty.

Our support for monitoring looks beyond monetary poverty to measure multidimensional poverty, which assesses children at different stages of their childhood to determine how many children are deprived of rights that constitute poverty (e.g. nutrition, health, or education). A 2015 study on Bosnia and Herzegovina, found that that almost all children aged four and under (98 percent) were deprived in at least one dimension, and a third (33 percent) were deprived in four or more dimensions at a time. Monetary poor children were far more likely to be deprived of any of the dimensions studied, and across any number of dimensions simultaneously.

Social protection in emergencies: cash transfers for refugee families in Turkey

The UNICEF-supported Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) programme aims to increase school enrolment and attendance for refugee children in Turkey. Participating families receive payments every two months. Families also receive an additional grant at the beginning of each semester to help them cover the school-related costs such as school books. The CCTE programme also helps to identify children who are at-risk of dropping out and refer them to relevant services.

A Syrian mother whose husband was imprisoned in Syria, and who was working as a cleaner in Izmir, could not earn enough to cover her rent and bills. None of her five children were in school and her oldest son, aged 9, was working to support the family by collecting and selling plastic and cardboard. She came to the Child and Family Support Centre in Izmir for help, and based on a vulnerability assessment social workers determined she was entitled to a protection voucher which enabled her to meet her family’s basic needs for two months. Meanwhile, a care plan was developed with the family to link them to longer-term social assistance. Social workers have helped the mother apply for a conditional cash transfer for education CCTE for refugees, and all her children are now in school.

Source: UNICEF monitoring data

An unfinished agenda

UNICEF’s experience across the Region demonstrates that robust social protection measures to shield children from poverty have positive results for families and communities. The task ahead is to ensure that such measures reach every child in need.

That is why we are scaling up our efforts in three key areas. First, providing policy advice and technical assistance to help governments to extend coverage and improve accessibility of cash benefits and complementary services for poor and vulnerable children their families. Second, we are working to strengthen the coordination and linkages between social assistance, family support and other essential services. And finally, we aim to embed a culture of regular monitoring, evaluation and research on child poverty to guide the design and implementation of effective policies and programmes.
Seven year old Sladana sits with her new school bag in the small village of Ciglane, Croatia, where she lives with her six siblings and parents. Children who grow up in poverty are less likely to do well in school, enjoy good health and reach their full potential in life. UNICEF in Croatia advocates to protect the rights of the most vulnerable children, including those living in poverty.